

CRASH Before You DRIVE

By John Johnston

It has to be one of the most unnerving experiences you ever have experienced while driving. The road is long, dark and endless. After working all day, and you've crawled into your warm car and are headed home. You're tired, and the CD player isn't holding your attention; as a matter of fact, neither is anything else.

You have been driving for the last two hours but haven't seen a convenient place to pull over, and you have only enough money for gas. Suddenly, you lose your focus, and your head tips forward. You have loose, disconnected thoughts. Then, suddenly, you realize you have driven several miles without really remembering it—about the same time you feel a jolt from the car running off the road. The bump and sound of gravel hitting the bottom of your vehicle makes you realize you have drifted off of the road. Your panic causes you to over correct. The car sails back across the road from which you just came. Sound familiar?

Driver fatigue on the road can be a killer. Marine Corps statistics show 60 Marines died while riding in PMVs from Oct. 1, 2001 through Sept. 23, 2002. Ten of these fatalities (17%) involved driver fatigue. For FY99 to FY01, 138 Marines died

riding in PMVs, with driver fatigue accounting for 29 deaths (21%). In one mishap report, a lance corporal was speeding down a road when he lost con-

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trol of his vehicle, and it left the road and hit a tree. He died on impact. Another lance corporal was driving fast and fell asleep at the wheel. He hit a reinforced concrete pole, killing a passenger and



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himself. Fatigue was a factor in both cases.

Which groups are at risk for fatigue driving?

Based on National Highway Traffic Safety Administration crash data along with survey and focus group research, several groups of drivers are most at risk. These groups include young drivers; male drivers; and persons who work long hours, non-traditional work schedules, or rotating shifts. Also included are commercial drivers, persons who have been drinking or who have taken certain medications, and persons with undiagnosed sleep disorders. All drivers are at risk in certain situations—for example, when driving long distances without rest breaks.

Driver fatigue happens frequently on long trips, especially at night. One cause of fatigue is alcohol consumption. Alcohol is a depressant, and a driver doesn't have to be drunk to fall asleep at the wheel. Even one drink can be enough to cause fatigue. Another cause of fatigue is the nature of modern-day driving. Most cars have comfortable, cushioned, seats in a quiet, carpeted, temperature-regulated environment. Many cars also have "cruise control." Most major roads have been developed so that sharp curves, hills and bumps have been eliminated. Additionally, dull landscapes, the droning of tires and engines, and the repetitive pattern of the tele-

phone poles, fences, and highway lane markings can lead to a dangerous effect known as "highway hypnosis," which can numb a driver's senses and slow reaction time.

Fatigue behind the wheel is a real hazard to Marines. Working long hours and traveling long distances without conducting an ORM assessment of your travel plans can put you in a life-and-death situation. The National Safety Counsel offers these tips for staying awake

while you are driving:

- Get seven to eight hours of sleep the night before a trip. Get enough rest, and don't start a trip late in the day. Long-distance driving is hard work, and you need to be fresh and alert.

- If possible, don't drive alone. Passengers can take turns driving and serve as observation partners to keep you awake.

- Avoid long drives at night. The glare of lights, both on your dashboard and outside your car, increases the danger of highway hypnosis.

- Adjust your car's environment so it helps keep you awake. Keep the temperature cool, with windows open or, in the summer, with air conditioning. Don't use cruise control.

- Watch your posture. Drive with your head up and your shoulders back. Legs should not be fully extended.

- Take frequent breaks—at least once every two hours, take a 15-minute break. Get out of your car, walk around, and stretch. Exercise fights fatigue.

- Stop for light meals. Drink juice or water.

- Avoid eye fatigue during the day by wearing sunglasses to fight glare.

- If fatigued, find a motel or a safe, guarded, rest area and sleep.

Safe driving demands your full attention. If you feel tired, plan ahead for what you are going to do. The actions you take may not just help you stay awake; they might help keep you alive.